

Blunted Sensibilities in Arun Joshi's 'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas'

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Abstract: Arun Joshi writes for expounding his ideas vis-à-vis understanding his own true self; for he essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of himself. His statement echoes the influence of Albert Camus, Sartre and Kierkegaard. The trio of the existentialists mentioned above has given new dimensions even to alienation. *The strange case of Billy Biswas* is an attempt to depict blunted sensibilities, find out viable alternatives for the most futile cry of man in smart society; the predicament of an alienated personality of the modern world.

Romi (Romesh Sahai) the narrator puts it in the following words at the very opening of the novel:

*'As I grow old, I realize that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. The attempt to understand is probably even more futile.'*¹

The idea of being "understood" is directly related to a person being rooted in a place and traditions. Billy's predicament become a special case when the reader comes to know that Billy's was a split personality-split between "primitive" and "civilized". Tuula Lindgren who is getting advanced training in psychiatric social work at Columbia gives it an expression when she ruminates: "Billy feels something inside him, but he is not sure. Sometimes he is afraid of it and tries to suppress it. ... A great force, urkraft, a... a primitive force ... it is very strong in him, ... It can explode any time."² Such is the struggle of the man who finds his identity lost in the so-called civilized world.

Introduction

Elizabeth B. Hurlock in her book Personality Development identifies three syndromes of alienation viz. "recessive," "socially disinterested" and "socially ineffective". According to her, these three syndromes "include traits that make a person disliked by others."³

In the Encyclopedia Britannica the following variants of alienation have been mentioned: (i) powerlessness (ii) meaninglessness (iii) normlessness (iv)cultural estrangement (v) social isolation and (vi) self- estrangement. In the modern world of growing hostility, mechanization, urbanization, changing values, depersonalization, disorganization, self-misgivings, delusions, rootlessness, discontent, psychological and other maladjustments, alienation has become a part of life. The result is that estrangement from self and from society is almost a common experience.

Billy is unable to cling to his roots neither in India nor in 'White America'. Billy stays at Harlem in New York though he could very well afford to live in some other area like Manhattan; for, he comes of an upper-upper crust of Indian society. But his persistent quest for self-realization beckons him constantly to live at the most human place where he may nurture a sense of belonging, a spirit of succor and superintendence by wholly preserving his identity. Just for not losing his identity, he studies Anthropology and not engineering which his parents want him to. His constant discomfiture to identify himself with his environs is reflected in his averred behavior which, in turn, is projected in his way of living, eating and dressing and even thinking.

A novel, being a perpetual quest for reality and the most effective agent of the moral imagination, in the present-day world, deals with the problems faced by modern man, and the writings of Indian novelists are no exception to this. 'The strange case of Billy Biswas' reflects how the character of Billy Biswas showcases this blunted sensibilities, as if some part of his being has gone on strike. The Billy that Romi knows, is finished, snuffed out like a candle left in rain.

In The strange case of Billy Biswas, Arun Joshi seems to be mediating between New Delhi and the Satpura Hills, between the two distinct cultures that these two geographic locations have come to embody not so much to dramatize the yawning gap but to make the situation plain, to reveal what has been lost and to reinforce the utter falsity of the so-called refinement of the Indian upper crust. What comes through is not a primitive celebration of the primitive Satpura life. The novel, so to say, lives through a tension between the two ends of a given civilization, between the two distinct tribalisms spanning the complex divide of a strange society. By no means is it an idyllic encounter between the primitive and the sophisticated in some sort of wilderness setting.

The strange case of Billy Biswas is a tale told with an excellent craftsmanship maintaining the contrast between the impulsive and seemingly eccentric behaviour and actions of Billy and the cool account of Romi, the collector friend of Billy. The novel begins with a very human and natural association between these two Indian students in America. It is not with a view to make any value judgement nor to evolve any confrontation between the East and the West that the author has put them in an American setting. The purpose of the author is to convince the readers that a great primitive force—urkraft as the Swedish girl Tuula puts it—is so very strong in him that even an expensive schooling and exposure to a highly civilized and modern Western society cannot destroy or overcome that force which possesses him. Like an internal hemorrhage it has hit upon him and he tries to suppress it.

The most besetting problem that man faces today is the problem of meaninglessness. As Edmund Fuller remarks in our age: *"man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem... a conviction of isolation, randomness, [and] meaninglessness in his way of existence."*⁴

The present century has seen the dissolution of old certainties and dogmas and, as Paul Brunton observes: *“Never before were so many people plunged in so much uncertainty, so much perplexity and unsettlement.”*⁵ Thinkers like Aldous Huxley have aptly pointed out that “ours is a world in which knowledge accumulates and wisdom decays.”⁶

“Man,” says Paul Tillich, *“is drawn into the world of objects and has lost or is continuously losing.”*⁷ The modern man’s problems have been discussed variously. But, as Erich Fromm points out:

*“In the nineteenth century the problem is that man is dead. The danger of the past was that men became slaves. The danger of the future is that men become robots, who will destroy their world and themselves because they cannot stand... a meaningless life.”*⁸

As a student in America, Billy is less interested in books on anthropology than in the place described in them. He could like to learn with real interest and absorption about the aboriginalness of the world and it is around his interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized. He has the first-glimpse of “the other side” of his personality at a music session, which keeps on exerting “a mesmeric pull” on him. Soon he finds himself “itching to be back” to a congenial atmosphere. His itch for India is an itch for realization of the relevance of life.

On returning to India, however, he feels like a fish out of water and sees no other way out but to fly from the civilized, sophisticated modern society. He makes a trip to the tribal wilderness—“the vast emptiness of central India” and vanishes into the saal forests of the Maikala Hills with a view to leading the life of a tribal and carving for his inner shrine of peace and happiness.

Romi Sahai meets Billy after a lapse of three years and is surprised to find him in a mental condition which is closer to madness, to terrible madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally finds himself in the presence of his God. Billy’s behaviour makes him think as though some part of him [Billy] had gone on strike. He ruminates:

*All my words simply sank upon his listless mind without so much as causing a ripple. Gone was the staggering intelligence, the spectroscopic interests, the sense of humor.... He was turned upon some obscure segment of himself, ferreting out a bitter secret. Whatever it might have been, the Billy Biswas I had known was finished, snuffed out like a candle left in the rain.*⁹

Even before his physical disappearance into the jungles, Billy cease to belong to the world. His Swedish friend Tuula had long ago sensed this primitive force in him. Even at the age of fourteen, while staying in Bhubaneshwar, he received the intimations of his primitive self. It was a though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake. “Something has gone wrong with my life,” he realizes. “This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of.” At that

time, however, he was not able to understand the source and the precise nature of this call. He says:

*I could not figure out what excited or troubled me unless it was a sudden interest in my own identity. Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?*¹⁰

In America, too, at the age of twenty, he had visions of being in a place. Other than where I was, in a place very, very old, at times a wilderness at other times full of strange primitive people. What makes the story of Billy fascinating and convincing is the wonderful coalescence of his rational outlook with his upkraft that triggers off the creative energy in him, prompting him to do what he does. The following extract from one of his letters to Tuula expresses his innermost feelings:

*When I return an expedition, it is days before I can shake off the sounds and smells of the forest. The curious feelings trails me everywhere that I am a visitor from the wilderness to the marts of the Big City and not the other way round.*¹¹

Conclusion

Billy is thus a refugee from civilization. The tenacity with which he pursues his quest in an incoherent and meaningless way is really astounding. Billy withdraws from the civilized world because it begins to make inroads into his own character. He remembers that all his life he had been confusedly driving towards his real. He recapitulates: “*I certainly underwent a deep metamorphosis that was, no doubt, responsible for all that I did subsequently. Layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling.*”¹²

Billy’s search for meaning, however, is conducted in a very hostile atmosphere and he has to pay a heavy price for it. The sophisticated society, in its “middle-class mediocrity,” makes it a point to bracket men like him with “irresponsible fools and common criminals” and does all that is possible to prevent them from seeking such meagre fulfilment of their destiny as their tortured lived allowed. Efforts to bring Billy back to civilization by capturing him by police force only lead to the final tragedy. He pays with his life for not conforming to the norms of the urban civilization- for daring “to step out of its stifling confines” and, as the novelist concludes, “*The strange case of Billy Biswas had... been disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers.*”¹³

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